

BLOGGER'S ROUNDTABLE WITH LIEUTENANT COLONEL GREGORY ZEHNER,
DIVISION CHIEF OF A-5 STRATEGY, PLANS, ASSESSMENTS AND REQUIREMENTS
FOR COALITION AIR FORCE TRANSITION TEAM, MULTINATIONAL SECURITY
TRANSITION COMMAND-IRAQ MODERATOR: JACK HOLT, PUBLIC AFFAIRS, OFFICE
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MR. HOLT: Welcome to the Blogger's Roundtable. I'm Jack Holt here
with the Office of Secretary of Defense-Public Affairs. And we've got on the
line with us D.J. Elliott from the Long War Journal. And we should have a few
more folks joining us as we get started.

But Colonel, do you have an opening statement for us?

COL. ZEHNER: Yes, I do. My name is Lieutenant Colonel Greg Zehner, Z-
E-H-N-E-R. And I'm kind of a unique person over here in CAFTT in that I can
provide comments on both the tactical and the strategic level of effort that
we're doing to help rebuild the Iraqi air force. That's because for eight
months I was out in the field leading a MiTT unit, a Military Transition Team
unit, that was training the Iraqi air force -- training them in new airplanes
and also in combat operations. And then I've spent the last four months here at
the headquarters working at the strategic level helping craft our campaign plan,
our way ahead for the next five years, that sets out how we, as CAFTT, are going
to try to get the Iraqi air force up from almost nothing up to a credible air
force. That's our main goal is building a credible Iraqi air force.

But first thing, a little something about me. I've been in the Air
Force a little over 19 years. I flew the A-10 for about 11 years, got 2,000
hours in it; went to staff school with the Army, so I've spent a lot of time
with the Army; spent two years at Fort Leavenworth, where I was going through
the Command and General Staffs College, and then stayed an extra year for the
School of Advanced Military Studies. So that's where they train you to, for all
intents and purposes, plan wars. And the graduates of SAMS have planned pretty
much every war since the invasion of Panama back in 1989.

So when I got over here, when the boss realized that I'd had that
experience, that's why he brought me up in late May, and we started working on
crafting a unified effort with the Iraqi air force.

When I first heard about this job over here, I started doing some
research, and pretty much nobody knew what CAFTT was. Nobody knew what the
Iraqi air force was. And it's probably not much different now. We don't have
that high a visibility. But I did some research, and by the time last summer

we'd gone to Hurlburt (sp), where about a hundred of us went through some training for about five weeks -- we got special training from the 6th Special Operations Squadron. That's the unit that trains foreign air forces around the world.

Well, they set us up to come over here; gave us really, really great training; got us all prepared to be advisers. They gave us pretty much their nine-and-a-half-month mission qualification training. They gave it to us in a very short five weeks. So we're nowhere near the air commando level that they were, but they spun us up as much as they could to get us well-prepared to come over here.

So a little over a year ago, I arrived at Kirkuk and took over from -- I brought six other people with me and took over from a hodge-podge of people, some great Americans, and started the long crawl upwards from where we were. I showed up at Kirkuk and took over an advisory unit where the advisers had not flown in probably 16 months since Memorial Day of 2005, and the Iraqi air force unit there had not flown since January of 2006. So this was September of '06 and they'd only started flying.

That has to do with the comp air accident -- (audio skip)-- Comp Air 7. And in July of '06, we were trying to -- we had rebuilt the Comp Air and were doing some test flights on it, and it almost killed a couple of our pilots. So the decision was made to bring a new aircraft in. So I showed up about a week-and-a-half after that new aircraft showed up. About September 11th is when the airplane showed up. And by the 23rd, when I showed up at Kirkuk, they had already qualified three crew and were flying combat operations around Baghdad. So that's about the situation I and my team had to take on, the seven of us, was building up a squadron that hadn't flown in nine months, training them in a new aircraft, and getting them up and flying and into a fight, aircraft that they'd never seen before.

In the interim, because of the comp air crash, they decided to procure -- they being the coalition -- decided to procure an interim ISR aircraft to bridge the gap between what we had currently and what we were going to get coming up to next year, a version of the C-12, a version of the King Air 350, with an ISR bird.

So the interim aircraft was assessed a caravan. So my deputy and I in February went back to the states to get trained up on that. So we had to train up the squadron in this new aircraft, so that's two new aircraft trained up within about six months and getting Iraqis up and running, and not only in training them but also in combat operations. We were doing both simultaneously.

And around about the time the third aircraft was showing up is when I came up here to the headquarters. And up here I helped craft our CAFTT campaign plan. And the driving factor behind it was a simple fact that no state or government is truly sovereign unless it can control and defend its own air space. And until it can, it will never have the confidence of its people or the respect of its neighbors.

That was kind of our driving force in this. We had to rebuild an air force that was -- it was the sixth-largest air force in the world in 1990 when they invaded Kuwait, and we had to rebuild it to a level that was credible enough so that -- we're thinking long-term here, but if you want to have an Iraq that is at peace with its neighbors, secure within its borders and a partner in the war on terror, you have to have an air force that's credible enough to

support a country, a state in the Middle East here, that is -- how can you say -
- it's not the most stable region over the last, let's say, 1,000 years or so.

So it's a pretty tall order, and we're trying to do the best we can on that. And it takes time. The problem is you really won't have an objective Iraqi security force until you can have that air force that can do all the things, even for counterinsurgency, from airlift and ISR -- intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance operations -- and even light attack -- you won't have a credible security force until that Iraqi air force is up and running, and, when you think longer term, until they can defend their own air space with aircraft and surface-to-air missile systems, you won't have a state that can stand on its own and stand strong on its own in the region until those things are set. So that's kind of what we set our eyes on. And we have a plan that takes us through about 2012. And again, this is the plan, and it's at least marks on the wall and milestones out there. We're looking to, by the end of this year, have a nonkinetic counterinsurgency capability. In other words, we can lift a certain amount of people from a base to a base, not necessarily into a fight, but from a base to a base. And we can provide some ISR overwatch of activities.

We're kind of doing that right now, but, you know, we're trying to smooth out all the edges and stuff. By the end of next year, by the end of '08, 31 December '08, we want to bring in some kinetic COIN capability. By that I mean the ability to bring some kinetic effects; you know, rockets, munitions into the fight. We are working on that through rotary-wing and fixed-wing stuff.

And in there, guess what: While we're trying to rebuild this air force here, we're having to build it at the same time that we fight it. We're doing both of these aspects simultaneously. As a matter of fact, there are missions on the Cessna caravan, for instance, that are training missions for the pilot and the mission system operator, the person that operates the infrared and electro-optical sensor ball. But their training missions are actually operational missions. I mean, what better way to train somebody than give them a target and have them take pictures of it, take videos of it, download it and work the system?

So that's a little bit about myself and what I can speak to, if you have any questions.

MR. HOLT: Okay, thank you very much.

Lieutenant Colonel Gregory Zehner is with us this morning for the Blogger's Roundtable. And it sounds like we had a couple more folks join us on the line, and we'll find out who that is here in just a second.

D.J. Elliott was first on the line. So D.J., why don't you get started here?

Q Good evening, Colonel. D.J. Elliott with the Long War Journal.

I'm looking at the aircraft you're getting over the next year. It looks like you're going to need to stand up some more squadrons. Can you give me any details on that?

COL. ZEHNER: Yeah, actually, you're right. We're going to have to stand up some more squadrons. But as for the details, I can't speak to that

level of detail. But I will tell you, the Iraqis will be working with the Iraqis. They'll have to stand up some more squadrons. And you've kind of highlighted an aspect there.

With the new aircraft coming in, there's a lot of stressors that we have. We have to build infrastructure for them, everything from flight line, ramp space, hangars. You need billeting for the new Iraqis that are coming in. And you might even need new bases over the next five years to bring in those aircraft, because you run out of space on existing bases.

We only have about 1,100-1,200 Iraqis right now in the Iraqi air force. We've authorized 2,900 through the end of this year, so we haven't even filled our authorizations, yet we're already feeling stressors on that. And by the end of '08, we're authorized to go to 6,000.

So with these aircraft will come a lot more people. And you're right; we will have to stand up some squadrons. But that's the Iraqis standing up squadrons and us working to help them on that way and bringing in advisers to help with those units. MR. HOLT: Okay, thank you, sir.

And who else joined us on the line?

Q Jarred Fishman with -- (inaudible).

MR. HOLT: Okay, Jared, why don't you go ahead?

Q Okay, thank you for your time, sir.

My question is, what can we do to make the Air Force kind of an elite of not only the Iraqi military but of society in keeping out sectarian issues and kind of making it like the Turkish military, where they view their role as part of the constitutional order and not really for one party or one religious group over another?

COL. ZEHNER: Well, actually, I'm -- I didn't say this in my intro, but I have a couple of master's degrees in history, and I'm somewhat familiar with the Turkish military and their influence in society. I don't really want to comment on that because that's kind of out of my lane here.

But what I think you're trying to ask is, how do we avoid the sectarian influence that we see in the Iraqi -- a little bit in the Iraqi army, but more so in the Iraqi police, or at least what the press says? I don't have any direct knowledge of that because I'm working with the Air Force, but I do read the newspapers and see what they talk about.

You asked about the Iraqis being an elite force. Well, actually, historically they kind of have been an elite force. They're the oldest air force in the Middle East region. They were stood up in -- what was it, 1934? -- 1934, and had a lot of British influence. As a matter of fact, you can still see a British influence. Their rank and insignia are like that. And the Brits had an independent air force.

So a lot of that has been modeled on the Iraqis. As a matter of fact, in the Iran-Iraq war in 1986, I think, they kind of saved Iraq's bacon in a bad time in 1986 and were national heroes for a while. But, of course, as national heroes go in a dictatorship, within a couple of years or so, I think, if I remember correctly, a lot of those people were purged, literally. So they

always had that kind of status in the military, as far as I can tell historically. And I've talked with a few Iraqis, but not into that detail in their history.

Q (Off mike.)

COL. ZEHNER: They knew where they were. They knew what -- nobody was asking anybody in the Iraqi army --

Q (Off mike.) COL. ZEHNER: Nobody in the Iraqi army was going to get a new car if they shot down an American aircraft in the late '90s, but Saddam was offering that to his air defense air force folks and his fighter pilots. If they shot down stuff, they'd get a new car or something, cash bonuses. That wasn't going to the army. So I can only imagine, but I would think that would cause some healthy rivalry between the two services. But again, that's from my reading of history. I don't have any -- I don't have solid evidence of that here right now.

But I think, back to your sectarian question, what I've seen is the Iraqi air force people I have dealt with -- and I'm comparing this with what I've read about the other services -- they are not very sectarian at all. They know who's Shi'a, Sunni, Arab Kurd, Turkoman. But it is not as big a deal. There's not a -- it's not nearly to the level of what you see in the other services, or at least what I've read that you see in the other services. So that in itself is very helpful.

I think that might come from -- and this is just my opinion -- think about what it took to be a pilot in the air force. You had to be a little more educated. You had to have had more college and stuff. And then they sent you. One of the many influences on the Iraqi air force, besides the British and the Russians, later on was the French.

And I have a couple of Iraqi friends who went to Mirage F-1 school in France, so they got to see a lot more of the world. And my opinion is that probably made them a little less sectarian to begin with. They were more Iraqi than anybody else. Now, they tell me that all the time. I talk with my Iraqi friends, and they are very much pro-Iraq, not pro-Shi'a, pro-Sunni or anything like that.

So I don't think you have to worry about what we have to teach them for that. I think that's in them already. We just have to help develop that and mature it, in a sense.

MR. HOLT: Okay, thank you, sir. Did anyone else join us online? Anybody?

Q Hi, this is J. Sigger from Armchair Generalist. I have two questions; well, at least one quick question. I came in late. And I was wondering, what was the tactical fighter that the Iraqi air force is supposed to be training up on? Or is there one -- the fixed wing, at least?

COL. ZEHNER: That's a good question, sir. We're still working on that right now. Along with the Iraqi air force, the coalition is -- we're helping to craft budgets right now, as a matter of fact. It's kind of dry and it's not sexy at all. And trust me, it's not the first thing that I would want to have learned. But when I got up here in late May, I was immediately thrown into a lot of the budget battles. And part of that was looking at the Iraqi air force

service plan. Now, they haven't picked particular aircraft, but they are looking at getting jet fighters and jet trainers in their future. Those are far enough off that they haven't made selections as to what type they are yet. But at the same time, it's not that far off that we can't -- we're going to have to start making decisions soon here, in the next, I would say, six months to a year easily, by starting to set up and buy those, because while our budget process is extremely long in the States to buy a fighter -- what was it, the F-22 was thought of in the early '80s, and we just finally got it up and running about a year ago?

We're trying to cut through a lot of red tape, but the Iraqi air force -- what was it -- last fall, I think, were trying to buy a light transport aircraft, a VIP aircraft, and were all set up ready to go, but they couldn't get it fast enough. It was delayed, what was it, a couple of years, I think. And that wasn't fast enough for them to work. And they were just going to a third country -- I think it was Spain -- to try to buy an aircraft, and it wouldn't work. So --

Q Right. Given your schedule, you were saying the end of 2008 you were expecting to do training on kinetic effects. It would seem that you would want to marry up the proposed fixed-wing fighter with that training.

COL. ZEHNER: That would be nice. But again, I don't think we're going to get a fixed-wing fighter in by then. We're looking at other options. That includes right now they have MI-17s that have rocket pods on them. They're brand new. They just showed up a couple of weeks ago, I think. So that will take training to bring that up to speed. But that's one way of bringing kinetic effects in, and that's here now.

A fixed-wing option -- we're looking at a few options right now. I can't comment on what they might be because, like I said, there's time lines. There's lead time on these things.

And the more you get into fixed wing and advanced helicopters, like an MI-17 with air-to-ground capabilities, the longer it takes for those to happen. The MI-17 was bought, I think -- about last fall they were starting to work the contract, and only now we're starting to get them in. So --

Q If I could ask a second question, I was -- I think the initial announcement we had, it talked about that you might possibly discuss U.S. Air Force counterinsurgency operations. My perception through the media, at least, is that dropping ordnance on urban areas has kind of a negative effect on the population, or at least it's put out that way. I wondered if you could perhaps discuss some of the evolving U.S. Air Force strategies for counterinsurgency using kinetic operations.

COL. ZEHNER: Okay, on that, I can only comment on the fact that I've got a history of working doctrine in the Air Force, and I went to a -- I don't know if you missed my introduction. I went to the School of Advanced Military Studies with the Army and studied a lot of strategy doctrine and theory there.

I am not as up to speed on the new Air Force document that just came out, so I can't comment directly on that. I will say this. There are times and places for kinetic operations. There are -- in a counterinsurgency fight, most of your stuff, most of your impact from air power, is across the dime, in the diplomatic, the informational and the economic, which has nothing to do with kinetic operations.

I'm not discounting kinetic operations. Don't get me wrong. I'm going to try to tie these together here in a way that I hope makes it a little more understandable. Most of the war-winning stuff that you will get from an air sense are intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, airlift and air medical evaluation. If you look as far back as the Small Wars Manual of the United States Marine Corps, 1934 version -- I think it was '34 -- that is -- no, it was '40, 1940 -- that is one of the essential -- those three are essential missions for air.

The kinetic stuff at the time wasn't as accurate, wasn't as big a deal, especially when you were dealing with insurgencies in jungles or small countries. Now, to bring your question into kinetic effects in an urban environment, not all of your counterinsurgency is in the urban environment, so kinetic effects outside the urban environment -- in a palm grove, in a date field, date grove -- a lot of the areas where, or even out in the open in provinces where you're finding guys in the middle of nowhere, a lot of area for kinetic stuff.

Bringing it into a city, yes, that does bring into issues. The only caution I would make there is you have to avoid mirror-imaging western perceptions of collateral damage. Now, I'm not going to sit here and say an Iraqi perception is different, because I haven't really gotten into that. I can't comment on that. But if you were talking about counterinsurgency done by a nation doing it itself, a lot of times they don't have the same opinions towards collateral damage that we would.

Now, we're a long way from independent Iraqi operations where they're fighting their own counterinsurgency with kinetic effect. Like I said, we're going to try to get some of that on by the end of next year, but that will still have heavy coalition involvement because there's just certain capabilities that the Iraqis don't have and probably won't be able to grow for a few years before we can effectively bring that into a large level. But we think we can bring in some kinetic effects, like I said, by the end of next year that will be -- that will actually have a tremendous impact on Iraqi security forces' capabilities.

Q Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay, anyone else? Anyone else on line? Any follow-up questions?

Q I have one. I've read in the fiscal year '07 budget supplement they were talking about a dedicated utilities squadron for SOF. Is that still on? And are they transferring a second squadron over, or what?

COL. ZEHNER: You're talking about a dedicated helicopter squadron or a fixed-wing squadron?

Q Yes, a utility --

(Cross talk.)

COL. ZEHNER: Yeah. We're still working on issues with that. I can't comment on whether it's dedicated or not because we're still ironing out issues with it. But we are planning on standing up, we hope, a new Iraqi squadron for that. It won't be an old squadron. It'll be a new one, and filling it in with -- we're not sure which aircraft yet.

Again, a lot of this stuff is in flux because, as we grow and as we move on, the landscape changes; again, the landscape from procurement issues to budget issues to what the Iraqis want. And that changes over time, too. So I know it's on the books -- at least it has been -- to stand up a separate squadron of rotary-wing support for SOF. But as for the final where it is and what it's going to do, exactly, we don't have that ironed out yet.

MR. HOLT: Okay, anyone else?

All right, Lieutenant Colonel Gregory Zehner, thank you very much for joining us for the Blogger's Roundtable today. And hopefully we can speak to you again in the future. Give it a few months down the road and see what else we might come up with.

COL. ZEHNER: A few months down the road I'll be a PCS to the Pentagon. I only have about a week left here in country. It's been a long year, a very satisfying year, especially just this last weekend. I went up to Kirkuk again and was able to see my old Iraqi friends and seen how much they've -- I can't believe how far they've advanced since May 28th when I left, but they're doing things that just watered my eyes -- I was so proud of them. But in a couple of months I'll be at the Pentagon. Maybe you can ask me then some stuff.

MR. HOLT: (Laughs.) All right, sir. It sounds like it's been a very productive year. And we appreciate you being with us today for the Blogger's Roundtable. Thanks again, sir.

COL. ZEHNER: Thank you, sir.

END.